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# On Display: The Poetics, Politics and Interpretation of Exhibitions

## *Introduction*

This chapter is going to take us through some geographical approaches to and issues about exhibitions – principally museum displays. First, I am going to try and outline some the reasons why we might be interested in museums. Then I am going to offer two main styles of approaches. The first will consist of three parts, looking at the ‘disciplining’ of knowledge in exhibits (picking up on some of the themes from the archive chapter), then look at ways of reading the exhibition; first through a semiotic approach and then through a narrative approach attending to the poetics of the display. Both of these suggest that we might treat exhibits like texts and subject them to a critical reading. In doing this I will suggest how we might unpack the politics that is bound up in the poetics of display. However, I want to also suggest that there are some limits to these approaches since they tend to ‘passify’ the audience and participants of displays, and leave them the silent subjects either assumed to be controlled by the displays and absorbing its meaning and or be spoken for by the clever academic interpreter who sees what is really going on. So I want to then spend the next section looking at performances in displays by both creators and consumers, in an approach that looks at interpretation as a co-construction by different parties.

In working through these approaches we will be drawing upon a range of theoretical traditions and it has to be said disputes. First, we will be using the tools of structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics and textual analysis. Both of these offer ways of reading exhibits – and as you may have guessed the latter is quite critical of the former. Second, we will be using syntactical and narrative linguistics. We will also then be drawing upon anthropological and folklore traditions to study performances, and media studies to look at audience interpretation. In setting the chapter out in this order, I am aware that it risks being read as having later approaches ‘trumping’ earlier ones – which is not entirely what I intend. Indeed, I want to show that I have used all of them to look at different aspects of the work that exhibits do. This is perhaps the common thread here, in that all these approaches look at exhibits not simply as displaying things but creating meanings. In other words I am focusing upon meaning as performed – both by the institutions and exhibits, and by people in them. In fact I want to suggest that put together they are practising cultural geographies themselves.

Methodologically then, I am going to draw upon a range of techniques and ideas. There is a certain amount of formal textual analysis, certainly close and critical reading of exhibits, but also issues of how to study the practices of performers and users of exhibitions. So we shall be thinking through different forms of observation as well as some conventional social science approaches to working with people. However, I shall also be trying to suggest that in this active perspective on creating meanings we are not just dealing with representations but what Allan Pred called repress-entations (Pred 1995) where some elements are actively silenced.

## ***Spaces of Ethnomimesis and Social Memory***

It is worth a brief word about why we might be studying museums, or rather the angle I am taking here, since it informs the types of approaches used. Thus I am interested in how exhibitions, and I shall restrict this to museums for the sake of clarity and length in this chapter, tell us about the world. That is they exhibit the world to us, and thus shape people's knowledge about different aspects of it. I am particularly interested in the stories museums tell us about who we are, who other people are and how we came to be in the situation we are now. That is museums tend to be set up to preserve the 'heritage' of a people and display it to them, so they could learn from their past. Museums are thus stories we tell ourselves about who we are – at least in the sense that it is our past that made us what we are today – they are part of our social memory. Thus definitions of identity typically stress difference from others and self-consistency over time, that is a group persists. Now I should add that museums tend to show that groups do not simply persist over time. Rather they are reflexively and more or less consciously refashioned, reinterpreted, reinscribed and reiterated over time as they tell themselves stories about who they are. To do this telling and retelling they invent and use a variety of institutions at a variety of scales – museums being one, school history might be another, films could be another, or oral story telling of folk tales could be another that portray 'publicly imagined past' (Blatti 1987, page 7). All of these are examples of what we might call 'ethnomimesis' – performing our group identity to an audience (Cantwell 1993).

These different performances use different approaches and involve different ways of communicating. And I want to use museums to suggest we need to think about how these different methods impact upon what is communicated. So I want to look at the relationship of different cultural forms with stories that are told – that is the poetics of how meanings are put together. Now so far we have been using collective nouns pretty freely – suggesting groups tell themselves their stories. One of the normal insights of cultural geography is that these tend to also be arenas of domination, contestation and resistance between different groups and elements of a society. Thus

museums start to give us an insight into whose version of history gets told. In other words we might see museums as telling a 'dominant memory', which tends to favour the view of powerful groups who control these institutions. Through controlling our notion of the past historians have suggested they are able to justify and buttress their power in the present (Porter 1992) (Johnson, McLennan et al. 1982; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1989; Norkunas 1993). Museums are thus part of hegemonic strategies, whereby a particular group in society sustain their powerful position by persuading others to consent to it, by making it appear natural, inevitable or justifiable.

One level of analysis is thus to unpack the interests behind different stories, to untangle institutional histories and so on. Here I am going to focus upon looking at the actual stories told – and how they are expressed. In other words to understand how a geography of group identity is sustained, I am going to look at the micro-geographies *within* exhibitions. I am going to try and see how these places persuade us about their version of the world, and what makes them credible. I also want to flag up one reason for this approach. That is focusing upon the institutional powers and interests behind exhibitions can slip into an approach that criticises a 'distorting mirror', that presents a skewed version of the true past. Rather what I am trying to suggest is that there are multiple competing versions – all of which use poetics and rhetoric in different ways.

## ***Reading Exhibits***

### **Exhibitionary complex: Disciplining Knowledge**

We might begin though with some sense of the formal emergence of the museum. When we think about it, the museum is using the organisation of objects in specially designed spaces to try and communicate messages. It uses spatial configuration as part of a way of shaping knowledge. In terms of its emergence, it has been linked with other practices that sought to categorise, define and regulate knowledge about the world – so in one sense we can see it as like an archive. Objects are taken from the world, classified and redisplayed according to those classifications. In other words the authority and classification tends to work by establishing an abstract system of authority and using that to create order and significance among the objects on display. Thus the folklorist, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that in anthropological museums:

"Ethnographic artefacts are objects of ethnography. They are artefacts created by ethnographers. Objects become ethnographic by virtue of being defined, segmented, detached and carried away by ethnographers. Such objects are ethnographic not because they were found in a Hungarian peasant household, Kwakiutl village, or

Rajasthani market rather than in Buckingham Palace or Michelangelo's studio, but by virtue of the manner in which they have been detached, for disciplines make their objects and in the process make themselves." (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, page 387).

Looking at the emergence of the public museum in the nineteenth century, we can see them as an enterprise producing a vast and expanding network of new classifications as they systematised knowledge about the world. But the classificatory mechanisms are not put on display. They remain hidden in the back regions of these institutions where new professions developed rules that were rarely made apparent to the viewing public. Hooper-Greenhill (Hooper-Greenhill 1989; Hooper-Greenhill 1992) points out that the public/ private division of knowledge was hardening in the nineteenth century, with a new role emerging for the state operating in the silent 'back' regions, such as archives, of the museum in order to produce knowledge that is then pedagogically presented in the front to consumers. This stresses a conception of a passive public who are meant to absorb knowledge created elsewhere. What this means is that artefacts, that we have suggested are as much artefacts of classification as the cultures where they originated, get presented as facts. The authority of objects are mobilised as providing indisputable evidence. This apparent facticity, or evidential quality for displays, means the conceptual work of shaping knowledge about cultures and places is hidden in the back regions of institutions. This means that the political and ideological decisions tend to be screened and allows the 'authors' of these representations, often the state and its institutions, to 'exnominate' itself, to leave the version unsigned as it were. Thus museums tended to produce an authoritative discourse by hiding the marks of its production (Shelton 1990). The classifications and rules through which exhibits are interpreted and categorised are written into the spatial ordering of objects – determining which specimens appear alongside which others, in notebooks, archives and exhibit cases. Thus, a neutrally scientific discourse is produced that is expressed at the capillary level of power in the seriated spaces that divide, classify and specify objects of knowledge and produce 'files of objects ordered by the military formations of the fields of knowledge' (Shelton 1990:98). The museum display thus produces artefacts through categories that serve to act as reciprocally as evidence for the regime of knowledge that gave rise to them where objects offer not 'authenticity' or knowledge but rather offer authority to the agreed, or always-already, rules of knowledge without which objects are silent texts *in potentia* (Taborsky 1990, page 64; Crew and Sims 1991, page 163). That is, objects only acquire meaning, only communicate to an audience through being taken up and mobilised in an interpretative framework. This organisation of space to allocate significance to objects is typical of a disciplinary knowledge whose "object is to fix, it is an anti-nomadic force ...[which] uses procedures of partitioning and cellularity" (Foucault 1977, pages 218-19).

The mention of Foucault's theorisation of the disciplinary matrix of the carcereal archipelago of prisons, medical institutions and archives accumulating knowledge raises the question whether it is not suspicious that just at the moment when Bentham produces his planned panopticon of enclosed surveillance a few miles away the Crystal Palace is being built, and a few years later the 'Albertopolis' of museums and exhibitionary institutions in Kensington (the Natural History

Museum, The Museum of mankind, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal geographical Society and the Albert Hall) all appear. Tony Bennett thus suggests that we need to think about the emergence of an 'exhibitionary complex' that by moving objects into progressively more public displays served to broadcast other messages of power (Bennett 1988, page 74). Or as Gregory put it museums and world fairs were part of a "wider constellation in which they are set: a spectacular geography in which the world itself appeared as an exhibition" (Gregory 1994, page 38). Just as Foucault pointed out the sophisticated, incessant 'capillary' scale of power in disciplinary institutions acting through specific spatial configurations, we might apply the same to museum. Here too we have the exercise of an inherently spatial reorganisation where the objects are first excerpted from their original cultural and communicative context then recontextualised in the spaces of the museum according to an externally generated syntax. The possible combinations of objects become a chance to spatially play with different sequences of remembering and time. As Hooper-Greenhill suggests we can see an attempt to 'spatialise material knowledge ... by the way in which words and texts were linked together and arranged in space' (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, page 90). I want to think about the specific ways of linking words and things in the next section.

## **Exhibition Semiotics**

Within museums then we might have to think about the rules which make objects tell stories. Such a process requires objects to be inserted into a discursive order to be legible and intelligible:

"The problem with things is that they are dumb. They are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie ... once removed from the continuity of everyday uses in time and space and made exquisite on display, stabilized and conserved, objects are transformed in the meanings they may be said to carry." (Crew & Sims 1991:159).

In other words when we take an object as evidence this is often done by selecting what it represents and silencing other possible meanings. This raises issues of authority and credibility – that is why we believe the stories told. Now at one level we can look at the public iconography of museums – often using classical facades, often large solid stone fronts engraved with scientific motifs that aim to appear as shrines or temples to secular, universal truths (Shelton 1990; Duncan 1991). So we might start to ask questions of museums about how they cast us as (ignorant) audience and themselves as sources of authoritative knowledge.

Let me take an example of one museum I have studied (see Crang 1999; Crang 2000) Skansen in Stockholm - and unpack how it shaped a message in its displays. What I want to do is illustrate how specific arrangements of artefacts can be used to support a specific version of history – in this case a nationalising project. So the first thing to think about is the context for the museum. Sweden had witnessed the rapid industrialisation of its cities and the mass emigration – up to twenty percent – of its rural population to places like the USA. So in other words we need to set the museum in a

context of rapid social change and instability. In the midst of this Skansen appears as an institution dedicated to telling a story to, principally, urban Stockholmers about the rural peasant types of Sweden. The first open air museum in the world, Skansen, was founded, along with the more conventional ethnological Nordic Museum, by Artur Hazelius, bringing together surviving remnants of folk culture throughout Sweden. This is what would now be termed salvage anthropology. It opened in 1891 and now has over 50 significant groups of buildings representing rural life (and others representing Stockholm's urban development) covering some 75 acres. The buildings were purchased from around the country and brought to the park, assembled into clusters not via some abstract typology but in terms of the cultures from which they came. Thus a Danish influenced farmhouse from Skåne, stands with its own barn and so forth, and a northern Same camp has its own stores, dwellings and animals—in contrast to a thematic display in a classical museum which might arrange all farm houses, all barns together to illustrate say typologies of development. 'Against the idea of distributing the nation's cultural heritage without attention to regional specificity—the idea of the classical museum—the ecomuseum pits its own concept of the refraction of museum culture in discrete environments' and instead of presenting them as fragments illustrating the museum's categories it represents an organic integrity (Poulot 1994, page 73). In other words its mode of display means that instead of illustrating say technological shifts and progress in specific areas of industry, agriculture or whatever, it illustrates regional types. It set about presenting Sweden in miniature, a Sweden conceived of as a mosaic of local cultures – each thought of as a more or less organic whole. In other words it created a mythic space where in the space of an afternoon the diversity of Swedish culture could be encompassed.

Thinking through the formal structure of the museum then led me to think through the implications of this as to what sense of Sweden was thus conveyed. First, we might say that contrary to what museums often portray, that is historical progression this was 'musée de l'espace' rather than a 'musée du temps' (Poulot 1994, page 66). Second, then this entailed presenting a series of holistic portrayal of organic, unified regional cultures. Put together this tends to stress the unity of local cultures (as oppose say to their fracturing by class and gender) and also to present that as static cameos, as cultures that do not evolve – and in this case were rapidly disappearing. So it offers a glimpse of static disappearing past, one where the 'folk' are rarely named actors but homogenized as types and cultures, and where change is portrayed as threat to or erosion of genuine folk culture. This is wrapped around notions of defining an authentic Swedishness, which we might find represented in one building. I only began to think about this building as standing in front of it I could not find it on my exhibit catalogue that linked each place to a map of Sweden. Not only that but as I was taking notes of each building in a notebook it seemed to me that this 'loftharbre' (storehouse) dated from the fourteenth century, making it by my reckoning the oldest building in Skansen. Looking at the plaque, which was discrete but certainly there, it became clear it also hailed from Telemark in Norway. This made no sense to me, until reading through secondary sources it became clear that the idea behind the museum and its collection emerged over time (obvious enough if I had thought about it that way before) and this building came from a time when Hazelius envisioned a pan-scandic collection. Indeed

Sweden had promoted pan-Scandinavianism through most of the nineteenth century. The secession of Norway from the Royal Union with Sweden in 1904 pushed the nationalisation of the folk culture and made displaying specifically Swedish folk types a more important pedagogic element of defining a national consciousness. This emphasis was reinforced as I wandered across the road to the Nordisk Museet, a more classical ethnological collection to be greeted in the atrium by a statue of the sixteenth century Swedish king Gustav Vasa, often associated with a high point in Sweden's political fortunes, sternly declaring 'Warer Swenske!' (Be Ye Swedish). Formally, this is a deconstructive reading – looking at the ways in which Skansen articulates a myth about Swedish identity, tracking the ways it produces that through specific exclusions and symbolic techniques.

If we think about museums that recreate the past, through living history displays or photodioramas, they not only tend to frame a specific moment from the past, but also to create a powerful effect of realism. That is with photographs or recreated environments, dioramas or whole museums depicting 'the way things were' this realism lends authority. It is very hard to argue with photographs (Porter 1989) which seem so factual. Of course they can be selected, they frame things and they tend to be used as backdrops for rather more theoretical and interpretative dioramas of how we think things might have been. Likewise, recreating an entire farmstead tends to replace verification with verisimilitude as a criteria to judge authenticity – does it look like it should? Especially in first person interpretations, that try and convey the immediacy of events by having actors play parts, they also cannot show ignorance. It may well be there are two or three theories of how something was done, but they will have to do it using one, and all the interpretative doubt disappears under recreated solidity. So we do need to think about how even with the best of intentions, displays enable and disable specific interpretations.

## Poetics and Display

The discussion of Skansen should perhaps thus indicate that museums work by manipulating symbols, or making objects into symbols of larger cultural processes. That is the artefacts become metonyms – where one item is taken to stand for the larger class of which it is a part. The other point to note is that this is less about individual items than the combination of them. Especially to note that this is about the combination and disposition of objects in space

"The relationship of objects in time are transposed into a spatial context, and that regrouping is imprinted in the memory of the visitors. This transformative capacity of museums, their ability to function as machines for turning time into space, enables them to be used as a system of social memory." (Yamaguchi 1991, page 61)

This then is not just a semiotic relationship between signs, symbols and the like. It is about the poetics of putting artefacts and exhibits together in particular configurations. So in Skansen we saw the creation of a museum portraying regional cultures as holistic, relatively static entities. We might look for an alternative at the classic 'Universal Survey Museum' (Duncan and Wallach 1980). This sort of museum attempts to lay out a grand narrative of development in a field. Thus let us say the Louvre, takes art history and classifies it by epochs – defining developmental progress and



significance. Its layout originally moved from Greek, to Roman, to Renaissance Italy, sixteenth century Dutch and on until it finished with nineteenth century France. In other words its categorisation of art history, while claiming to be a neutral depiction told a story that happened to lead up to then contemporary France as the pinnacle of artistic endeavour. Duncan and Wallach (Duncan and Wallach 1978) point out that the layout thus forms the 'script' for a visit implying spatial arrangement can place exhibits in a story. In an analysis of the Museum of Modern Art in New York they illustrate how the route 'progresses' from a shared, realistic portrayal of the world to art that grows increasingly abstract and subjective portrayal where each work of art becomes 'so many moments in a historical scheme' with the exhibits and rooms linked together as if in a chain so Guernica ceases to represent the horror of carpet bombing and instead symbolises a shift from Cubism to Surrealism. The effect of these museums is also to position the spectator as located with a privileged viewpoint from where they can see the 'whole history' – in what we might see as a totalising gesture.

The narrative museum layout – where the path of the visitor is managed to follow a story, has become much more popular in recent museums. Thus visiting the British Waterway's museum in Gloucester it becomes clear that it tells a story which naturalises industrial change – showing the rise and decline of the canal system, with a slightly upbeat twist at the end that reflects its ownership by the owner of the national canal system (Crang 1994). Notable in its story, is the absence of struggle and conflict. To borrow a description of Ironbridge Gorge museum and think about the absences, this is a depiction of the industrial revolution – without the revolution (West 1988). As a visitor we are guided through a series of stages and developments in much the same we would be as if were a story in a book. There are few opportunities to skip a few pages ahead since the route was physically prescribed. Indeed in more prescriptive versions there is a narrator – my favourite being taken through the Timewalk in Weymouth by a talking cat in a cod-piece. Each diorama lit in turn and a spotlight highlighted the cat mannequin who in one his conveniently spaced nine lives was on hand to tell us what was happening. If we think about that literally absurd device, it is clearly an attempt to personify the universal survey museums god-trick – of the all knowing view, omniscient and omnipresent. The designers were clearly trying to take out some of the starched rhetoric from this with a more accessible character that could perform the same function. What it does is reveal fairly starkly the claims lurking in the impersonal, unauthored apparently neutral voiceless museum that lets its spaces speak for it. The sense of actually narrating the past I want to turn to at the end, while for a moment I want to pick out something else that went on as we followed our cat – the vague sniggers of the audience, the stifled groan at the period costumes the cat wore and the vague sense of how naff it was that pervaded the group of spectators with which I happened to be walking.

## ***Doing Displays***

So the second main part of this chapter I want to use to outline some limits to what has been said so far. Thus all the talk of textual readings and semiotics lead Meaghan Morris point out that the reader of all these texts seems to be a 'cruising grammarian' (Morris 1988). I have cited my own work so far to make clear that I have some sympathy with the effectiveness of these readings, but I am also aware that as I talk of the texts producing certain effects I am speaking for the audience. I am giving you my reading of the implied reader the museum wants to read it. That is one that 'gets' its message, believes it and learns it. I have been outlining how for instance conflict and social divisions might be glossed over in the interests of powerful groups in society. This risks suggesting a situation where people visiting museums automatically imbibe this message.

"The only problem with this wretched scenario is that it has been devised by people who are compulsive readers of texts. They pay close attention to their semiotic surroundings and believe that others do too." (Mellor 1991, page 114)

In other words although we can be clear that the museum may organise its interpretations in particular ways – that is not the same as saying its visitors come out agreeing, or following them. Indeed Handler and Gable so far as to suggest that semiotic readings of the representations, catalogues and exhibitions miss the sociality of the process, so that 'most research on museums has proceeded by ignoring what happens in them .. very little of it focuses on the museum as a social arena in which many people of differing backgrounds continuously and routinely interact to produce, exchange and consume messages.' (Handler and Gable 1997, page 9). Similarly a museum researcher opined

"most analysis has taken the form of critical reviews of the messages inherent in contemporary museum presentations, with little concern being demonstrated for the experience of those who actually visit them. We do not therefore know how people use museums and whether they assimilate the messages, intended or unintended, that museums give out." (Merriman 1989, 149)

So I want to spend a little time pointing to some of the social activities going on in museums and how we might wish to engage with these. I will begin with thinking about visitors then thinking about people inside museums.

## **Making sense**

One of the principle problems in terms of working out where to start thinking about visitors is the sense that we may be asking the wrong question. Thus in the museum business there is a paradox of endless visitor surveys showing that visitors really quite like the place, but declining markets. And the answer is of course that if you talk to people who visit you are only getting one subsection of the public – and study after study shows it to be more well to do and educated fraction. But let us suppose we are limiting ourselves to those who visit and what they make of the displays. One simple solution is to ask them. I say simple provided two things work – first someone will give you

permission to second, butt in on people's leisure time and ruin their visit with endless questions. It is a well known difficulty to get any in depth commentary from people in these sorts of environments. So it may be we must think of arranging focus groups or interviews elsewhere. The problem then is you get a retrospective account of what they remember. Or even more particularly what they think you think they should have remembered.

Let us go back to Swedish open air museums, but move away from Stockholm into the rural provinces where hundreds of small institutions preserve the typical buildings of their regions, indeed their parish. Talking to visitors, observing them reveals that in many ways the exhibits here are secondary – to taking a picnic, to playing, to going to a folk concert. Looking in the visitor books – a fairly unrepresentative source, the comments are not too helpful, but quite often there is a pattern of a few Swedish addresses and one from the United States. Talking to some colleagues, they said that of course when relatives visited from abroad one of the staple options was to take them to the local museum. So the museum becomes incorporated in personal and familial narratives – and connects them with those on local identity and culture. The meaning of the museum begins to shift as its context of use changes.

More formally, we might think about what I was doing wandering around these museums. Or more particularly just how rare I was – a solitary visitor, with a notebook, assiduously studying each exhibit, pondering their significance. You soon realise how odd when it is clear people are staring at you because you are the only one taking things this seriously. The vast majority of visitors were in groups. Even if we discount school groups and the like (though why should we?), then still the bulk of people are in families, couples and dyads all the way up to organised coach tours. Some of these may have guides who may give things specific ideological slants (Katriel 1993). But even if there is no tour guide, then there is often an informal expert. How often have we all heard a child ask a parent, who is equally confused, what an exhibit is about? Groups pool expertise, and misinformation, they converse and in this way large and small scale narratives intertwine (Rowe, Wertsch et al. 2002). Thus studies indicate a great deal of what we do at exhibits is talk with our fellow visitors and this is a major factor in how we recall and take on board the visit (McManus 1987; McManus 1988; McManus 1989; McManus 1993). Thus we may remember rather more about social events than the exhibit, and the way we interpret the exhibit may well be framed by our social experience.

Not only this sense of visitor activity but there are other ways audiences engage with exhibits. So as I loitered and made notes at various museums, I kept having to step out of the way of the steady

stream of people. And gradually it dawned upon me that we need to be aware of the steadiness of that stream. Once again observation studies indicate that after about 30 minutes most visitors simply start walking along, noting looking but rarely lingering (Falk and Dierking 1992). In other words the ordering of exhibits also distributes the amount and kind of attention they are likely to get. Now this is not to say that all visitors are inattentive, or do not gain things that displays try and tell them – but it is a note of caution about assumptions that museums encode meanings and simply transmit them to audiences. In fact we might see the opposite flow of interpretative actions and communication in some exhibitions, as, for instance, at a local museum in Sweden which had an archive of old photographs copied out to display and invited visitors to provide details – clearly speaking to a local audience and local expertise, asking them to contribute to historical interpretation through their personal knowledge.

I do not want to celebrate here some kind of resistance to hegemonic narratives. Sometimes museum directors make clear that they are struggling to get across the basics of chronology, sometimes visitors clearly uncritically take on board the intended message. But you cannot with certainty say that the promoted interpretation will simply be transmitted. The action of personal, group and incidental knowledges might be thought of as an ‘anti-discipline’ to knowledge. Not necessarily good or bad but rather less certain and predictable. The plurality of possible readings then is something that needs to be stressed. It seems then important to think through how our approaches can be geared up to respecting and reflecting these diverse practices.

## **Enacting Exhibits**

Earlier, I mention actors or interpreters recreating environments. This has become quite popular as a way of getting across the personal and active elements of the past. And of course if it uses the first person, with actors pretending to be figures from history – be they famous or ‘ideal typical figures’ – this lends a fragile but effective authority to the interpretation. They speak as if they know from first hand. I say fragile since it is still not always ‘credible’ or believed. But here in these cases the interaction of visitor and performer may well be crucial. Moreover, some of the claims about these performances are that they have certain interpretative truth to them because they are fully worked through embodied performances. Thus, actors get hot in period clothes, corsets do stop people running, and in some institutions long run experiments of cultivation or styles of work may go on. What is more this performance, this ethnomimesis begins to call into question our view point from which to interpret and criticise what is going on. Representationally these create not holistic islands of regional culture but of time:

'they are all places out of time - anyway, out of *this* time. They are visits to times past. They allow, encourage, us to play, for a time. In order to do this some of them, rather worryingly to some of us, play *with* time. Death and decay are, it seems, denied. Strangely and paradoxically in the context of institutions nominally preoccupied with the passage of time, these phenomena are not allowed to occur. This denial of the realities of time, this artificial omission of any interval between then and now leads to the ready assumption, indeed the implication that then and now are very similar, and that *we* and *they* are, except for a few superficial differences, similar also.' (Saumarez-Smith 1989, page 65)(p65).

In other words these are quite good at intimate vignettes but poor at linking them in to wider trends and long run processes. Thus, looking at a small southern English group of reenactors, I decided to use participant observation as a method – through which I could see what they doing, see the performances, see the interactions with visitors and experience the supposed historical connections, and the strains and stresses of performing the past. I was interested in issues about realism, about hegemony and how English history and identity were negotiated in a portrait of an Elizabethan manor house. But what I rapidly discovered was that I was not the only one interested in these issues. The other reenactors were also very keen on it. I was interested to look at how myths developed – where first person interpreters gave out poor information and how this develops into an orthodoxy within that institution. I found seven easily enough – they were listed on the back of the coffee room door as things to avoid perpetuating. Meanwhile, just as I was attempting to make an ethnographic account that would work out the norms and customs of a community of reenactors I began to discover that the best analogy for what they were doing was being ethnographers of a community that that never existed. Thus as fast as I read books on re-enacting to inform my performance, they were reading books on period customs; as fast; as I attended seminars on playing roles within groups, they were going to workshops of Tudor roles to play. To make the life of the researcher harder, I was having to do both of these sets of trainings. ( For a more detailed account see Crang 2000) My days were spent playing a Tudor, before trying at night and in breaks to pour my thoughts into tape recorders. And if there is an easy way to feel self-conscious that is it. But given the costumes – one of the limitations of participant observation was that I could not drop out of character and make notes during the day, and at night in a tent it was too dark to write. So taping it was. In this exercise of ordering my thoughts from sections of the day then dictating them to myself, I began to think through the parallels of what I was doing and what was being done by the reenactors. Both were trying to interpret a culture to an audience and both doing it through learning embodied performances. Notice I emphasise trying, in that I would not claim to authoritatively have become an ‘insider’, since that tends to overstate both my access, authority and risk suggesting there was some one single homogeneous culture of reenactors. And likewise they were trying to act like Tudors, knowing that they would make mistakes and that they could never actually succeed.

The issue I am approaching here is one of reflexivity. Basically I had to position myself in relation to the people I was working with and ask what ability I had to claim the authority to interpret what they were doing. Just as they themselves were quite scrupulous about what authority and ability they had to interpret Tudor life. This was especially challenging as reenactors in general had been the subject of a lot of fairly hostile academic commentary. Much of which seemed to conflate worries over the effects of the form, in terms of downplaying long run narrative and critical debate in favour of small scale immediacy, with a social distaste for this as a hobby and form of learning. 'Legitimate' education in universities seemed to be judging informal educational approaches and saying they were found wanting. But found wanting against the criteria of the academy of course. Re-enactors were quite able to turn the judgement around and question the effectiveness of wearisome lectures that pointed to tedious books that were written in impenetrably cautious language and propped up on obscure and conflicting footnotes. The issue that became clear for me then was that there no neutral point to judge these different criteria. They had to be seen as part of sets of social values that were in competition. It was a situation that needed rather more than a critical reading from an outsider, but a negotiation of how values conflicted and the different messages coming through displays.

## ***Concluding remarks***

Perhaps unsurprisingly then I have tried to suggest a range of approaches might reveal different significances in exhibitions. I outlined how a close critical reading can often suggest the ways displays shape their stories and frame arguments in particular ways – and how evidence such as objects and artefacts is not independent of these shapings but rather the stories create their own evidence. This effort to unpack the production of knowledge relies heavily on a textual metaphor, where we treat space as though it were a way of writing the world. The use here has been in part to look at how political and ideological assumptions get written into the fabric of displays, as their underpinning assumptions – which are thus hard to contest or dispute. I have also tried to suggest that sometimes this reading practice can be too seductive, that it offers us the vision of the clever academic telling the world what is really going on. Instead I have tried to emphasise that this critical approach needs some modesty to accept the plurality of practices, and its own social situatedness. In other words we can point to a truth but by no means the only one. There are then a plurality of readings, or even of ways of reading exhibits that mean displays are polysemic – they have multiple meanings. I have tried to suggest that we need to think of the range of ways people might interact with and interpret exhibitions – including physical motion, social interactions, inattention as well as attention. The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco once called these 'aberrant readings', but I prefer to

see them as engagements in different ways. And these different ways of engaging may challenge the way academics tend to interpret things by stressing different ways of 'apprehending' or grasping the world and thus making different interpretations from it.

I have kept to museums to make this discussion manageable. There are some specific histories and issues with museums – the changing role of the state, of scientific and academic knowledge, of the enclosure and control of space. But there are related spaces that might be approached in the same way. Thus we might think of other exhibitionary spaces such as world fairs and expos that we might think about through this lens. Other sorts of exhibitionary spaces might be less spectacular but things like the ideal home exhibition, agricultural shows or, if we push this more widely, shops or shopping malls – looking at the placement of items, the surrounding environments and how they try to create certain values and meanings for consumers. We might also try and connect these to wider theories about why specific forms emerge at specific places and times – a historical geography of exhibitions. Thus I have suggested the technology of the Victorian museum might be linked with other forms of knowledge and power that emerge at the same time. We might ask if the shift to less serious, or less portentous, more entertainment driven spaces in the last twenty years now speaks to a different constellation of knowledge and power being prevalent in society. We might ask about the continuities and shifts in who gets exhibited to whom – who gets put inside the glass case as it were, made into an object of scrutiny for whom, who gets to classify whom, and how identities are thus shaped in a changing world. Of course in the current world we also need to factor in other technologies of display – ones such as various forms of media – to ask how they interact with, reinforce or conflict with each other. In other words the dusty world of displays and exhibitions can be used to address some key questions in contemporary cultural geography.

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